

EUROPEAN AGUDA CONVENTION

RUSSIAN JEWRY REBORN

Charedim may be losing the initiative

By Dovid Stern

IT WAS to be expected that the Russian Jewry workshop would attract a large number of people. Both the subject and the speakers were the draw. An introduction by Rabbi Dovid Jacobson of Golders Green, intimately involved in *kiruv* in the former USSR set the background for the discussion.

One of the first people in the field of spiritual relief for Russian Jews, Mr Mordechai Neustadt of the American Aguda's Vaad L'hatzolas Nidchei Yisroel, gave an up-to-date picture of the overall situation in this field. He bemoaned the fact that the original interest in the fate of Soviet Jewry, while the Communist regime was still in power, had waned now that there were open borders and it had become almost commonplace to visit these communities. This interest, he declared, needs to be reawakened once more. At the same time we need to find the right type of people to dedicate themselves to reviving Yiddishkeit in the lost communities of the former Russian empire.

He described how they had found the Jewish Community of Kuba in eastern Azerbaijan. This all-Jewish town of 200 years with a population of some 10,000 had once kept Yiddishkeit in the full meaning of the word. However a sudden visit by members of the NKVD who took almost all the town's Rabbonim and shot them, started the slow decline into *am ho'oratzus*. The one remaining Rov was *niftar* some months ago.

KASHRUS

Understanding the issues

SOME of the intricacies of



Rabbis Jacobson, Neustadt, Bleich and Weissler

Living conditions were primitive. The Vaad had sent 45 young men to help the community raise its standards once again. This was just one instance of the Aguda's programme for former Soviet Jews.

The Chief Rabbi of Novosibirsk, Siberia, Rabbi Yehuda Weissler spoke of the heartbreak in trying to introduce people to even the most limited form of Judaism in Siberia. Anyone who had the slightest interest in seeking a return to his or her roots had already left the area. Those who were left were not interested: so much so that even a person with two Jewish parents could simply declare "I am not Jewish". Rabbi Weissler spoke of the problems facing *kiruv* workers from a disinterested remnant. The question facing them was: do we try to get individuals, who finally express an interest and a willingness to learn, away from Siberia and so prevent any real spiritual growth in the community or, do we leave these individuals where they are with all the dangers inherent in following such a policy? To understand how bad things are, it is necessary to know that inter-marriage is now standing at almost one hundred percent.

Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Kiev, spoke of the different approach that is required for Ukrainian Jews. Whilst the more sophisticated Russian Jew can be tackled on a more intellectual level, the Ukrainian Jew needs a simpler approach.

Although there were a number of towns with religious facilities, the dangers from missionary groups such as "Jews for J.", which had spent a quarter million dollars on advertising alone recently, was enormous. He also spoke of the destructive work of Jewish Agency officials who had representatives in 100 towns in Ukraine alone.

He described how Agency officials had organised a "disco" on Friday night as their contribution to Yiddishkeit and how they used the Shabbos morning in the Synagogue to get people to fill in and sign forms for aliya to Israel.

In making a plea for people to come forward to assist in this work for the rescue of former Soviet Jewry, he underlined the obligation on West European Jews with an incident concerning the Chofetz Chaim ztl. There was a certain Jew who used to visit the Chofetz Chaim regularly. On one occasion he was refused entrance on instructions of the Chofetz

Chaim, without any explanation. All entreaties failed and he returned to his home town. Later, after falling ill he sent new requests to the Chofetz Chaim to at least let him know the cause of the Gaon's displeasure. Eventually, he received a message that he could again visit the Chofetz Chaim.

On his arrival he was asked by the *tzadik* what his profession was, to which he replied that he was a *melamed*. The Chofetz Chaim pressed him further: did he once have a talmid by the name of Leibele Bronstein and what had happened to him?

The *melamed* replied that the child was an orphan and although he had for a time taught him without fees, he eventually could not continue to do so. As to what had subsequently happened, he did not know. The Chofetz Chaim said, Leibele Bronstein grew up to become the infamous Leon Trotsky from whom Jews suffered so much.

It was evident, Rabbi Bleich concluded, that the Godol Hador felt the *melamed* bore a certain degree of responsibility. The analogy to our present day situation was clear.

The discussion which followed discussed practical suggestions and displayed a willingness on the part of members of the audience to organise new initiatives in the field of *kiruv rechokim* for the Jews of the former USSR. Taking part in the debate were people involved in this type of activity including Rabbi Sender Dominatz and Dr Morris Sifman.

MARRIAGE

Good advice dispensed

GOLD'S FACTORY OUTLETS

QUALITY

VALUE

DIRECT
TO THE
PUBLIC

THE
WARREN GOLD
PERSONAL
MONEY BACK
GUARANTEE

DON'T MISS OUT!

FOR
HER

SCOOP
PURCHASE

'Leslie Fay'
exquisite,

long sleeved,

Dresses - Suits - Jackets

Ideal for 'Charedi' Ladies

AT A FRACTION OF THE STORE PRICES

DRESSES £79.95 £32.95 AT GOLD'S

JACKETS £159 £47 AT GOLD'S

NEW DELIVERY
BLAZERS - JACKETS

TROUSERS

SHIRTS - SUITS

MAIN STORE BRANDS AT

FACTORY PRICES

FOR
HIM